

Policies from the People

Towards a fuller Australian democracy

Australia is called a [democracy](#). About once a year most adults go along to the local hall, and spend a few minutes writing numbers on ballots for council, state, or federal parliaments. The ability to do this is rightly valued. It has taken centuries, and many lives have been lost, just to win the ability to choose our rulers, and perhaps even more valuably to dismiss them again if they prove inadequate – a right that is still not enjoyed by far too many in this world.

But it is nothing like a full *democracy*, from the Greek for *government by the people*. It is a representative not a direct democracy, but some of our elected representatives fail to represent our views. Some of them forget they are our servants, not – even temporarily – our masters.

It is unlikely that we can run Australia as a direct democracy, using the [Athenian model](#), the [Swiss practice](#) in some of its municipalities and cantons, or the [proposition model](#) of some US states.

But it is time we voted not just for *who* rules the country, but *how*.

Our democracy is a work in progress. This document outlines how it might move forward. The proposed changes do not require legislation, though they might require [administrative action to grant electoral roll access](#) to a relevant organisation. It will need time and effort from those electors who are dissatisfied with the current extent of Australian democracy. Wouldn't that be many of us?

This document suggests that [quality practices](#) be followed in [stating problems and arguing for solutions](#). Accordingly it attempts to do so in this document itself by:

- Indicating the scope of the work
- Describing the problem (*current state, desired state, gap*) trying to avoid implying solutions
- Offering solutions

Scope of the work

Australian democracy, particularly the current inability of electors to adjudicate explicitly on policy in areas of government, law and society generally, and the effective control of the constitution by the federal parliament, even though it is the parliament that is supposedly subject to the constitution.

Problem statement

Current state

Selection of rulers by electors is by voting for candidates once every few years for each tier of government (federal, state, council). Elections are by proportional (sometimes optional) voting.

Elected members are representatives of their electorates, not delegates. There is no mechanism to delegate their actions on any matter. They must make their own decisions. [Edmund Burke](#) argued that whilst the representatives should listen carefully to their constituents they should not act just as delegates but exercise their own judgement: “*Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.*” Maybe, but a representative that pays next to no heed to the electorate's opinion is most unwise.

Electors' knowledge about candidates is often little or none, other than by press coverage or from their party affiliations when that is presented on the ballot paper.

There are almost no official ways in which Australian electors can register any preference for policies, with the exception of rare federal or state referendums or plebiscites; the questions are defined by government, and the answers typically must be *yes* or *no* to each question. It is rare for a federal referendum to be held unless it has bi-partisan agreement within federal parliament.

There have been just 16 state [referendums in New South Wales since 1900](#). There do not seem to be established general arrangements for Australian councils to hold referendums or plebiscites.

Politicians sometimes claim a mandate to implement a particular policy “because it was in our manifesto” even though many electors may have voted for them despite that policy.

Outside of elections, influence by citizens over governments is by communicating with elected government or opposition members, petitioning, getting coverage for issues in media and so on.

Any influence over others in sectors such as industry, commerce, agriculture, religions, charities and so on is effected through laws, courts, and direct communication or via media pressure.

The parliament is controlled by the constitution, and yet it is the parliament that decides on any referendum to change it.

Desired state

Easy availability of detailed information for voters about all candidates.

Easy availability of information for voters about most areas of government policy and many other areas of activity within the society expressed as quality problem statements and proposed solutions.

Easy access by those on the electoral roll to a system that can record their opinions (as a numerical indication) about those policies, problem statements and solutions. Each elector’s individual input must be strictly secret, but aggregates of those views can be seen by everyone. Views can be from national aggregates to selection by electorate, council, gender, age and so on.

In particular, it should be easy for elected members to examine the aggregate of their electorates’ views on various issues whilst they are deciding on how to vote themselves on each issue. It is not intended to direct them to a particular vote – they remain representatives, not mandated delegates.

A system to implement the above is to be run by popular subscription and is not to receive continuing financial support from any branch of government.

Gap

Voters may learn about each candidate if media organisations, such as local and national press outlets, have provided that information, often sourced from candidates themselves. The AEC (Australian Electoral Commission) listed [all 2016 candidates](#) but with minimal information:

House of representatives:

State	Division	Candidate	Party	Ballot position
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Senate candidates:

State	Group	Candidate	Party	Ballot position
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The ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) site for the 2016 election included a paragraph about each candidate contesting the seat. The source is not stated and for some candidates is no more than the party; example: [Warringah](#): scroll down to *Candidates*. Some of the material would appear to be written by political journalists, not necessarily neutral to the candidate.

There is no coordinated comprehensive catalogue of areas of government policy (or similar issues within non-governmental society) with problem statements and various solutions. The closest a voter comes to registering a policy opinion is to become aware of the election-time policy offerings of candidates, usually via their political party, but a vote is of course not explicitly for each policy, but for the candidate espousing those policies. And there is no certainty that policies offered prior to election will be honoured or a clear record provided indicating if they were honoured or not.

There are few (and rare) official mechanisms (referendums, postal plebiscites), and informal ones (opinion polls, understandably surveying a tiny fraction of the electorate), to determine electors' policy opinions. It is hard for a representative to determine electorate opinions on any matter.

There is no system currently existing that could implement the desired state.

Solution

Outline

An online system shall be created to manage Policies from the People, give information about elected members and candidates, and coordinate constitutional change ideas. It shall be funded from non-government sources – primarily public subscription – to avoid conflicts of interest.

Detail

A web site detailing each candidate's age, gender, education and government or society experience.

A policy section providing:

1. Policy areas covered and current policies, including possible constitutional changes
2. Problem statements
3. Solutions proposed
4. Electors ability to submit (1-5) level of agreement to problems, and preferences for solutions
5. Monitors to publish the level of concurrence by members with electors' views

There shall be authoritative authors of the substantive pages for items 1 to 3.

For every substantive page there shall be a discussion page on which electors may comment.

Each enrolled elector is entitled to a login. That primarily enables the elector to indicate a level of agreement to selected items from 1 to 3. Unlike at elections, this can be done at any time, and thus begins to represent a near real time expression of voters preferences on many subjects (though it is most unlikely that any electors would attempt to express an opinion on every item in the database).

Logged in electors should examine each item in an area of their concern, and then choose:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

Logged in electors can add to discussion pages on 1 to 3 to submit suggestions to the lead authors:

- additional areas to be covered
- problems
- solutions

The above is perhaps the only way electors can reasonably express their preferences for policies, since to do so via a ballot box would be completely impractical, and would in any case be a snapshot of electors views at one time, instead of a rolling collective opinion in near real time.